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From the Peace Corps, Voices of Experience

Up to 4,500 American military people have descended on Honduras for another go-round of war games. The latest excitement in the hemisphere's second poorest nation is to be heightened by armored personnel carriers and tanks, neither of which has been deployed to Honduras. All this is meant to preserve the peace in Central America.

It happens that a group of Americans who once lived in Honduras, as well as in six other neighboring nations, have tried an alternative way of peacekeeping. They are Peace Corps volunteers. Recently they produced a provocative and timely report, "Voices of Experience in Central America: Former Peace Corps Volunteers' Insights Into a Troubled Region."

This one-of-a-kind book—based on 170 responses to a nine-question survey—is not another abstract weighing of foreign-policy pros and cons. It offers much more: The recollections of Americans who, in painful horror, see their work among the poor of Central America, and the idealism that inspired it, being cast aside by such blights as Honduran war games and ceaseless shipments of arms.

The 128-page report, which was funded by the National Council of Returned Peace

Corps Volunteers, is grounded in the 1961 legislation that created the agency. The act had three requirements: Volunteers were to assist developing countries, help those countries better understand the United States and—in the work of a lifetime—educate America about the world's poor. In 1981, President Reagan, in calling for increased Peace Corps funding, said that with more volunteers "Americans may become more aware of the needs of the Third World."

The report overflows with awareness. To start, not one of the nurses, teachers, foresters, biologists or other volunteers says that their host country would have been better off with military aid. The pressing urgency, first, was always for understanding.

■ A nurse in Honduras (1972-74): "The United States feels they are the benevolent big brother doing good things for these people. They fail to realize their money and good intentions are rarely received at the local level where needed. They fail to realize the pride these people have for their country."

■ A credit-union worker in Guatemala (1969-72): "[Americans] don't know where [Guatemala] is and don't understand how the United States has trained, supplied and encouraged the

murderers and torturers who are in power, oppressing the innocent peasants."

Among the 39 respondents who served in El Salvador, nearly all speak of lawlessness and violence. The subtle forms were noticeable. A nutritionist says that "Salvadorans resent the fact that the majority of their land is used for producing export crops. Beef, an excellent source of needed protein, is sent to the United States for our consumption while their citizens die of hunger and malnutrition." Another volunteer, who worked in the national museum in San Salvador, recalled "that most young people like Peace Corps volunteers. [But] some of the young, educated Salvadorans viewed the agency with suspicion—as a possible CIA cover. They had the utmost contempt for the CIA because of its history of support for Latin American dictators."

One volunteer served as a professor of teacher education from 1977 through 1980. "During the Carter term there was a change of attitude by the El Salvador government. They murdered a bit more discreetly. They lied a bit more softly." And

what happened after? "When Ronald Reagan was elected there was dancing in the streets by the 14 families. Fresh blood was pumped into the sagging machine."

The first of the volunteers who served in Nicaragua went there in 1969. The latest left in 1981. The report states: "The Sandinistas appealed to the international community for economic assistance. The U.S. government answered by encouraging an economic boycott and by launching a 'secret war' from Honduras. Twenty of our 21 respondents feel that the United States should support the Sandinistas and that the present U.S. military threat serves only to push them further to the left."

Some 7,500 Americans have served in the Peace Corps in Central America. Each volunteer could have written a book on his or her experiences. Their words in this report are brief, and at times they have a tone that sounds excessively leftist. That, however, is deceptive. The words are neither left nor right. They are from the center—from the heart of the issue, which is that the approach of the Peace Corps is the one that needs to be enlarged, and all others diminished.